

## Farmers markets growing out of season

## *by* Bridget Macdonald *Feb* 04, 2009

Andy Wright and his son Timothy got on the road to Chicago a little behind schedule that cold Saturday morning. "We were running late," Timothy said. "We usually try to leave by 3:30 a.m." Fortunately, the father and son from Hart, Mich. had prepared for their trip the night before.

Instead of suitcases, the Wrights packed coolers with prime cuts of grass-fed pork for the first day of Green City Market's winter season. The 10-year-old farmers market usually shutters in November, but beginning this January is open on the first and third Saturday of every month through spring, sheltered within the Peggy Notebaert Nature Museum in Lincoln Park.

According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, farmers markets are growing steadily, with 26 percent more nationwide in 2008 than in 2004. In Illinois, growth is even more impressive. Over the past five years, the number of farmers markets in the state has increased by 67 percent. Delayne Reeves, Illinois's marketing representative for the USDA, said her agency does not keep track of how many of the markets stay open in winter, but that there is sustained demand for local food year round and a drive to connect producers with consumers.

While many small producers sell to restaurants, caterers and stores during the winter, participating in a year-round market enables them to expand their client base and nurture relationships with existing customers. Harry Carr of Mint Creek Farm said he is glad to have face-to-face interaction with consumers during the winter. If nothing else, he said, "it gets us out of the lambing barn."

In the museum's South Gallery, a flock of cooks prepared for the opening culinary event within a corral of banquet tables. The "Snout to Tail" tasting showcased pork from market vendors prepared by chefs from local restaurants.

Between bites of pulled pork made with shoulder from vendor Twin Oak Meats, Lee Ann Soble, 62, said she rarely eats meat, and never buys it anywhere other than at Green City. With the opening of the year-round market, she will have more access to locally produced food during the winter months. "My husband just got some lamb necks from Mint Creek to make stew," Soble noted.

At \$7 per pound, the lamb from Carr's Mint Creek Farm was comparable in price to grass-fed lamb shoulder from the Whole Foods Market on North Ashland Avenue, where it was priced at \$6.99 per pound on Jan. 20.

Although Carr has considered selling his meats at Whole Foods or through a Community Supported Agriculture cooperative - an arrangement that has become common practice among fruit and vegetable producers - he said now that the winter market is open, "Customers can come here and get what they want, when they want, without a long-term commitment."



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The four moveable greenhouses farm manager Mike Bollinger built at Heritage Prairie Farm, in Elburn have allowed him to extend his growing season into the cold winter months.



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Illinois is fertile ground for farmers markets, according to the local office of the U.S. Department of Agriculture. The state began tracking the trend in 1999.



The market creates a viable future for producers who are too small to break into retail, giving them a long-term outlet with invaluable "closed-loop feedback" from customers.

"How do you do that in Whole Foods?" he wondered.

Sarah Stegner, co-owner of Prairie Grass Café in Northbrook, dished out important information with each plate of sausage and beans she served to participants at the tasting, informing patrons the pork came from Liberty Family Farm.

"[Andy Wright] told us more people have been coming to his booth after tasting the sausage," Stegner said, concluding, "So, it's working."

For a small operation like Liberty Family Farm, the boost to business during the seasonal lull helps to sustain the bottom line. "It gives us, as a family farm, a direct market to customers and chefs all year," Wright said.

But the winter market is more than just a sales venue. Andy's wife Denise explained that the communal and educational nature of Green City is invaluable: "Our customers have been really faithful. We produce for them." Although Wright said selling to a store like Whole Foods is a possibility, her priority is sustaining a small, family operation.

Green City Market doesn't contend that all its meats would satisfy Whole Foods' standards.

"You're not going to find the same standards anywhere else in the city," said Edward Cintron, head of the meat department at the Whole Foods in Lincoln Park, "What you pay for here is quality." He explained that the store obtains its meat from producers who do not use any steroids or hormones on their animals. Although all of the meat at Whole Foods was raised on a vegetarian diet, the animals are not necessarily pasture raised or grass fed.

Lyle Allen, the executive director of Green City, said he thinks of his market as an alternative to Whole Foods, rather than a competitor. "We are all about local, sustainable, and small family farms."

But in order to ensure uniform standards, vendors must provide complete disclosure about their operations on their applications to the market.

Meat producers who sell at Green City are required to report use of any feed additives, injections, hormones, antibiotics or growth promoters on their livestock. They are asked to describe the surroundings in which the animals are raised, and provide certificates of inspection for licensed processing facilities from the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the Food and Drug Administration and the local health department.

Allen said high standards are necessary to meet his goal of making Green City a fully certified, sustainable market by 2012. He said that with the significant momentum the market has gained, he sees only bigger things.

Green City's transition is a manifestation of growing demand throughout the city. Robin Schirmer of Winter Farmers Markets & Meals for Hope coordinates host venues throughout Chicago where local farmers can sell their products beyond the growing season. This year, her organization is sponsoring 30 markets, up from 19 the previous winter.



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A reminder at the bottom of a board advertising Mint Creek Farm's lamb prices provided an incentive for customers to try something different.

"There is a hunger for this kind of food," she said, "as evidenced by Green City deciding to extend their season.

"Since we started, we have always had a dream of establishing a year-round market in Chicago," Allen explained. Over the past few years, community members have expressed a similar vision. Allen said he heard mounting requests for a winter market from both producers and consumers: "People have been seeking us out."

Allen estimated that the attendance at the winter opening was around 1000. He said the atmosphere at the outdoor venue in the summer is very different, and does not lend itself to direct comparison. But Allen reasoned Saturday's turnout was comparable to a market day in November, and he considered that a success.

"You saw it yourself," Allen added, "There is such a need and interest for this in Chicago. The support is there."